

FIU PITCHER MENDEZ, 20, DIES SUDDENLY

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Ramiro "Toti" Mendez, a sophomore pitcher at Florida International University who was sitting out the season as a medical reshirt, died suddenly at his home in Miami on Sunday. He was 20.

A viral infection sidelined Mendez this year after a 4-1 freshman season, but the cause of death was not released. Funeral mass will be held today at 11 a.m. at Little Flower Church in Coral Gables, with the burial at Miami Memorial Park. Mendez will be buried in his FIU uniform, and the school has announced his No. 23 will be retired.

Mendez is survived by his parents, Ramiro Mendez and Maria Suquet, and four older siblings.

The FIU team learned of the death after a road victory over Louisiana Tech on Sunday. Mendez was very popular because of his fierce competitiveness and a sense of humor that kept everyone loose. Though he couldn't play, he came to practices and games to remain close to his teammates. There was no reason to think his life was threatened.

"We are in total shock," coach Danny Price said Monday. "When we told the players, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. We spent all Sunday night talking and reminiscing about Toti. I cannot explain to you the grieving process this team is going through. Toti was such a great person . . . a great person."

FIU third baseman Gus Alfonso said he and his teammates were on the bus celebrating their victory over Tech on Sunday when they saw the coaches talking outside. "We knew something was wrong from the looks on their faces," Alfonso said. "When they told us what had happened, we were devastated. That was the last thing we expected. I don't think a word was said all the way back to the hotel.

"When we got there we said a prayer, then for about an hour and a half guys just sat around in their rooms in disbelief. The doors were open. Nobody changed clothes. A lot of guys were crying. Then we spent the whole night telling stories about Toti. He was a fun guy who made everybody laugh. Having him around was awesome."

Mendez attended Westminster Christian High School, where he was named Miami-Dade County's Class 4A-1A Player of the Year as a senior in 1998 after going 13-2 with 165 strikeouts in 97 innings. Westminster won three state championships and the mythical 1996 national title during Mendez's career at the school.

Rich Hofman, then Westminster coach (and now coach of Westminster Academy in Fort Lauderdale), recalls that Mendez preferred to play first and third base in his first three years and only committed fully to pitching as a senior. "But once he did, he really turned it on full time," Hofman said. "He had a whole different mentality."

The final game of Hofman's 31-year career at Westminster Christian was a state championship showdown against Father Lopez of Daytona Beach. He gave the ball to Mendez, who pitched a shutout.

``That was quite an ending, my most emotional moment until last [Sunday] night when I had to meet his mother. His loss left me totally stunned."

Hofman also said Mendez was special.

``He had a tremendous heart," Hofman said. ``He wasn't blessed with the greatest physical attributes, but he had great determination that he was going to make something of himself in baseball. I look at most of my players as adopted sons, but he was one of the special ones.

``He came so far, both as a player and a person, and as a coach it's always your desire to see that kind of growth. I really couldn't have asked anything more than what I got from Toti Mendez."

FIU first baseman Raul Pujol was a high school and college teammate of Mendez.

``He was a real good friend, a guy who kept a smile on everyone's face, a guy you always wanted to be around," he said. ``I almost feel like I've lost a brother. It hurts. It hurts a lot."

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